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ABSTRACT

The issue of contempt expressed towards the aged was examined from a cross-cultural perspective. Eight reasons for expressions of contempt emerged from a study of 95 societies drawn from the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample, and were treated as independent variables, with the overall level of contempt as the dependent variable, in a application of multiple correlation procedures. Results indicated that six reasons for contempt account for 59% of the variance. In order of declining importance, these were: (1) lack or loss of children; (2) deterioration of appearance; (3) loss of physical strength and stamina; (4) gaining negative traits, such as being accused of being witches or sorcerers; (5) mental deterioration; and (6) lack or loss of skills and/or obsolescence thereof. Two reasons for contempt, loss of wealth and hoarding of wealth, were excluded as insignificant. These findings suggest that children and other family members act as the first defense against older people being held in contempt, that physical change in appearance may be more important than is popularly believed, and that the possession of wealth may be less important. (Author)

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EXPLANATIONS FOR CONTEMPT EXPRESSED TOWARDS OLD PEOPLE*

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EXPLANATIONS OF CONTEMPT EXPRESSED TOWARDS OLD PEOPLE[1]

We recently completed with Philip Silverman a cross-cultural study investigating the relationship between the control of useful information by old people and the esteem in which they are held. The primary hypothesis was that when old people know something which other consider relevant, their position in the community was enhanced and this would be reflected in the treatment accorded them by other community members. We also investigated the influence of certain social conditions, particularly the isolation of the community and the rigidity of the social structure, which were considered antecedent to the involvement of old people in information processing. Additionally we developed an analysis of the content and context of the information-processing activities of old people. Secondarily we were concerned with sources of power available to the aged, defined in the study as control over scarce, valuable resources.

The universe from which the sample was drawn was provided by the 186 "distinctive world areas" in the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample (Murdock and White 1969). Our 55% random sample yielded 102 cases, well above the minimum number suggested for such a study by Rohner and Pelto (1970). Sample decay reduced the number to 95. In order to cover the major variables and to control for other possible influences, a lengthy codebook was prepared using a precoded format. To establish reliability approximately 20% of the cases were coded independently by more than one coder. We attempted to avoid order effects by aggregating societies into sets, each set containing a society representing one of the major culture areas (Africa, Circum-Mediterranea, Eurasia, Insular Pacific, North America, and South America). Coders began with a society from any

set, but did not proceed to another set until all of the societies from the first were completed. The more pertinent quantitative findings of the study have been submitted to National Institute on Aging (Silverman and Maxwell 1978).

We were concerned not only with deference shown towards old people, but with contempt as well, which we called "negative deference." Since we did not know exactly what to anticipate by way of instances of negative deference, the following instructions were issued to coders.

> Negative deference. Record any statements indicating that the aged are demeaned or treated in a disrespectful or contemptible manner. This item is more or less self-explanatory, but here, as elsewhere, coders will need to be watchful for indirect relationships between deference behavior and age. Among the Eyak, for example, people who suffer from Arctic hysteria are ridiculed to their faces, and most of the people who suffer from the disorder are old women.

Concerning negative deference, the statements must be clear and unambiguous if the item is to be coded as present. In some societies, old people perform tasks that would appear to be repugnant to most sensibilities -- retrieving the corpses and so on -- but do not infer that this is an instance of negative deference unless it is clear either from the context or the ethnographer's statement that the job is distasteful both to the old people who do it and to the other members of the community and that, furthermore, there is no evidence that other community members are at all grateful or in any way appreciative of the service. (Maxwell, Krassen-Maxwell, and Silverman 1978: 61).

Our investigation focused on the explanations for the expressions of contempt; that is, the reasons given by informants for their poor treatment of the elderly. Eight explanations emerged from the data:

1. Physical deterioration: loss of strength exclusive of sexual potency; sickness and decrepitude.
2. Mental deterioration: senility, mental weakness, "vulnerability," inability to function because of mental incapacities, offensive behavior.
3. Deterioration of appearance: wrinkles, gr_ay hair, sagging breasts, ugliness.
4. Hoarding of wealth.
5. Lack or loss of skill and/or obsolescence.
6. Lack or loss of wealth.
7. Gaining negative traits: feared as witches or sorcerers.
8. Lack or loss of children; no family support system.

Of course, each of these eight reasons for the contempt of old people were inductively arrived at after examining all of the instances of contempt which appeared in the data. Each reason for contempt represents a category into which a number of separate instances were collapsed.

Instructions to coders continued as follows:

Each instance of negative deference found in an ethnography is to be coded in terms of: (1) the implied explanation(s) for negative treatment of the aged; (2) the sex of the aged person(s) to whom the negative action is directed and (3) the negative action(s) itself.

Five/spaces/have been provided for each instance of negative deference.

In the first/space/code the appropriate explanation of the negative deference statement.

In the second/space/code the sex of the person to whom the negative action is directed.

In the third/space/code the first negative action which is the result of the explanation coded above. (If no additional negative acts occur, the following two/spaces/should/indicate "none"/.

In the fourth/space/code the second negative action (if one exists) which is the result of the explanation coded above.

In the fifth/space/code the third negative action (if any) which is the result of the explanation coded above. (Maxwell, Krassen-Maxwell, and Silverman 1978: 138-139).

These instructions are not as difficult as they may sound. They ask simply for each reason given for an act of contempt, the sex of the person addressed, and the various ways (up to three) that the contempt is expressed. Thus, for instance, the statement that "they complain with distaste about 'tortoise rump,' a woman who is old and has a wrinkled rump" is relatively easy to code. The reason given for the contempt is the biological deterioration of appearance; the sex addressed is female; and the action is open complaints and ridicule. Our manual permitted the coding of as many as four such statements, which turned out empirically to be sufficient. After some experience, coders had no difficulty with the procedures.

The frequency of these reasons for contempt varies across the sample as a whole. The frequency distribution for the eight reasons for contempt in the entire sample is given in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

Table 1 gives the number of times each reason is used in each society, the number of societies in which the reason is used, the relative frequency in percent, and the cumulative freguency in percent. For "physical deterioration," for instance, we see that 72 societies (75.8%) did not use it as a reason for contempt at all; 21 societies (22.1%) however used it as a reason for contempt once; while 2 societies (2.1%) used it twice.

Looking over the table, we see that "physical deterioration" is the reason most often given for expressions of contempt, occurring at least once in 23 of the 95 societies in our sample. "Deterioration of appearance" was used as a reason next most often, occurring at least once in 15 of the societies. "Mental deterioration" came next, occurring in 12 societies, followed by the gaining of negative traits, (10 cases) lack of a family support system (9 cases), lack or loss of skills (5 cases), the hoarding of valuable good (2 cases), and loss or lack of wealth (1 case).

It is to be noted that the frequency of occurrence of a given explanation is not necessarily the same thing as its importance in explaining variation in levels of contempt. Thus, for instance, if the actual level of contempt varies greatly, and if a given reason for contempt occurs in every case, the reason can explain very little of the variation, since it is itself a constant.

Now, in addition to finding eight reasons for contempt, the investigation uncovered eighteen kinds of acts of contempt, which ranged from giving the elderly "scrap food" to actively killing them:

1. Presentational neglecting: e.g., served last, not mourned, mistreat corpse.
2. Material property not maintained.
3. Material neglect: property confiscated, robbing aged, throwing them out.
4. Physical neglect: non-support, scrap food, poor medical care.
5. Physical neglect: assault, mugging, killing, abandonment.
6. Non-specific neglect: "Elderly not cared for."
7. Open, face-to-face complaints, ridiculing, displaying disgust.
8. Indirect complaining about the aged in their absence, grumbling.
9. Modality of insult non-specific.
10. Assigned devalued tasks.
11. Ignoring aged: non-person treatment.
12. Avoiding aged: staying away from the aged, treating them warily.
13. Excluding aged from social group membership.
14. Excluding aged from sexual/marital relationships, sexual betrayal.
15. Excluding aged from work or ceremonial groups.
16. Deposing: a loss of authority or influence.
17. Magic to make aged sick or to kill them, urging them to die.
18. Strangling or smothering during the death agony.

The varying number of acts by which contempt was expressed towards the elderly yield a rough measure of the overall amount of contempt for old people extant in each society. Of course the acts differ among themselves in terms of intensity: obviously strangling an old person is more intense an expression of contempt than insulting him. And there must also be some variation of intensity within each category: some insults are milder than others. However, the data with which we dealt were too crude to permit such refinements as weighting. For the moment, let us accept the number of different acts of contempt as a tentative measure of the overall level of contempt in which old people are held in each society.

The number of acts can then be treated as a dependent variable, and the different kinds of explanations for these acts may be treated as a series of independent variables. Obviously then some reasons for contempt will be more important than others in accounting for differences in the overall level of contempt in which old people are held.

The proper procedure for a better understanding of the relative importance of these reasons in explaining the level of contempt is multiple regression analysis. Accordingly, we performed a forward (stepwise) regression on the data, a standard regression rather than a hierarchical one because we assumed no linear causality among independent variables. The correlation matrix is given in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

It can be seen from Table 2 that no correlation between independent variables is higher than .33, which is acceptable because it avoids the problem of multico linearity. No independent variable is a perfect linear function of another. They add quite separately to the variance explained.

Table 3 presents simple and multiple correlation data of the 95 societies in the sample, relating the eight explanations for contempt to the overall level of contempt.

Table 3 about here

Two explanations -- lack or loss of wealth and hoarding of valuable goods -- were dropped from the analysis because their F values were less than one, .31 and .96 respectively. In other words, the variation in these variables could have occurred by chance, or else the variation in these variables was accounted for by other variables in the equation.

We note that the explanation with the strongest predictive power (highest correlation with negative deference) is "lack of children," with a correlation of .46 (explaining 21% of the variance). "Deterioration of appearance" accounts for the largest proportion of the remaining variance, adding 14% predictive power to that of the first variable. Adding the third explanation to the equation, "physical deterioration", allows us to explain an additional 14% of the remaining variance. Note that this variable did not explain the greatest portion of variation in contempt, although it accounted for the highest frequency. None of the remaining explanations accounted for more than 4% of the remaining variance in expressions of contempt. The total amount of variance explained is 59%. The overall F test uses statistical inference procedures to test the null hypothesis that the multiple correlation is zero in the population from which the sample is drawn. In this case, the value of F is 21.18772 (df=6,88), which is significant at the .005 level, giving strong support to the notion that the relationships uncovered in this analysis are real.

The results indicate that there are at least six important reasons for expressions of contempt towards old people on a pan-global basis. In order of declining importance they are: (1) lack of children or family support system; (2) deterioration of physical appearance; (3) deterioration of physical strength and stamina; (4) acquiring evil characteristics; (5) mental deterioration; and (6) lack or loss of skill and/or obsolescence.

Several rather interesting findings emerge from this study. First, the frequency distribution of the eight reasons for contempt reveal only 2 cases in which "hoarding of valuable goods" is used as an explanation, and only 1 case in which "lack or loss of wealth" is given. This is interesting because it suggests that the role of wealth in determining the status of old people, particularly as a defense against expressions of contempt, may largely be limited to modern, industrialized societies. Away from the industrialized community, material wealth may simply not be that important, partly because in many societies in our sample, including most hunters and gatherers, there is not very much property around. Common sense tells us that wealth ought to be important, but that common sense is based on observations made in Euroamerican societies, representing only a few social experiments out of thousands.

The results of the multiple regression suggest that kinship systems, and especially children, are extremely important sources of prestige and power in non-industrialized societies and that for the elderly they provide the first line of defense against being held in contempt. Secondly, we find that deterioration of appearance and the loss of strength are rather important determinants of expressions of contempt. Certainly it is to be expected that loss of physical strength should be imprtant, but it is

surprising that the deterioration of physical appearance should play such an important part in determining contempt, being second in importance. It seems, so to speak, to be such a superficial reason for treating someone badly. It may be, however, that in our own society too physical appearance may be an extremely important component of one's social self, but it is one that no one likes to talk about. The paucity of studies in the behavioral sciences dealing with the differential destinies of beautiful and ugly people may be another expression of this disinclination. Finally, and also surprisingly, we find that neither mental deterioration nor loss or obsolescence of skills is an important determinant of negative deference. E. K. Maxwell's work (1979) indicates that an older person can become senile and still be honored, not so much for what he is but for what he has been; he becomes in a sense a living shrine. The relative unimportance of loss of skills is perhaps related to the somewhat simple division of labor in many of the societies in our sample, reducing the significance of the skills held by any one person, and also to the relatively slow rate of social change in our societies, which militates against the rapid obsolescence of skills. In a totally static society, no skill would ever become obsolete.

Certainly, however, the most important understanding to be gleaned from this study is that a family is extremely important to the well-being of older persons. An elder needs to have a family in order to display whatever residual skills remain with him. He may become enfeebled, lose some of his acuity, or become to some extent irrelevant, but his family can protect him from expressions of contempt from others. The family system seems to be the ultimate protection against total social bankruptcy.

TABLE 1

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION OF REASONS GIVEN FOR CONTEMPT FOR ELDERLY

REASON FOR CONTEMPT	NUMBER OF TIMES REASON USED IN EACH SOCIETY	NUMBER OF SOCIETIES	RELATIVE FREQUENCY (Percent)	CUMULATIVE FREQUENCY (Percent)
Physical Deterioration	0	72	75.8	75.8
	1	21	22.1	97.9
	2	2	2.1	100.0
Mental Deterioration	0	83	87.4	87.4
	1	9	9.5	98.9
	2	3	3.2	100.0
Appearance	0	80	84.2	84.2
	1	14	14.7	98.9
	3	1	1.1	100.1
Hoarding	0	93	97.9	97.9
	1	2	2.1	100.0
Loss of Skill	0	90	94.7	94.7
	1	4	4.2	98.9
	2	1	1.1	100.0
Loss of wealth	0	94	98.9	98.9
	1	1	1.1	100.0
Gaining Negative Traits	0	85	89.5	89.5
	1	8	8.4	97.9
	2	2	2.1	100.0
Lack of Children	0	86	90.5	90.5
	1	8	8.4	98.9
	2	1	1.1	100.00

TABLE 2

CORRELATION MATRIX OF REASONS FOR CONTEMPT TOWARDS OLD PEOPLE

	PHYSICAL DETERIORATION	MENTAL DETERIORATION	OBSOLETE SKILLS	GAINING NEGATIVE TRAITS	LACK OF CHILDREN	LACK OF WEALTH	DETERIO-RATING APPEARANCE	HOARDING
Physical Deterioration	1.00	-.14	.11	.10	.09	-.06	-.16	-.08
Mental Deterioration		1.00	.00	-.12	-.04	-.04	.02	.10
Obsolete Skills			1.00	.12	.26	-.02	-.01	-.03
Gaining Negative Traits				1.00	-.02	-.03	-.07	.33
Lack of Children					1.00	-.03	.08	-.05
Lack of Wealth						1.00	-.04	-.02
Deteriorating Appearance							1.00	-.06
Hoarding								1.00

TABLE 3

RELATIONSHIPS OF REASONS FOR CONTEMPT TO LEVEL OF CONTEMPT

	PERCENT VARIANCE EXPLAINED (R^2)	CHANGE IN (R^2)	PARTIAL CORRELATION AT ENTRY	SIMPLE CORRELATION
Lack or loss of children	21	--	--	.46**
Deterioration of appearance	35	.14	.42**	.41**
Physical deterioration	49	.14	.46**	.34**
Gaining negative traits	53	.04	.29**	.21*
Mental deterioration	56	.03	.27**	.10
Obsolete Skills	59	.03	.23*	.31**

* Significant at .05 level (df = 94)

** Significant at .01 level

NOTES

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